

Fort Union Trading Post

GUNS OF FORT UNION

Visitors to The American Fur Company's Fort Union marveled at the variety of firearms amassed within the walls of the fort. Many were guns destined for trade with various bands of Northern Plains Indians while others were owned by employees of the fort. As well, the quality of these weapons ran the gamut from the most basic, inexpensive to the best weapons on the market. Including all sizes; everything from large caliber rifles to small pocket pistols. Guns, of all shapes and sizes, were a part of daily life at Fort Union.

TRADE GUNS

The guns traded by the American Fur Company were of three primary models; the Northwest Trade Musket, the Lancaster rifle and the

English rifle. Guns were common trade items on the Northern Plains. Initially, before Fort Union's historic period (1828-1867), guns traded from Hudson's Bay Company filtered down through Mandan Hidatsa trade centers and were exchanged for horses flowing upwards from the southwest. Once Fort Union was established it quickly surpassed the Mandan Hidatsa Villages as a trade center.

NORTHWEST TRADE MUSKET

The Northwest Trade Musket, a smoothbore flintlock, was the most popular gun traded at Fort Union and at the competition forts of the Hudson Bay Company. Practical and utilitarian uses made these gun popular. To the Nomadic Northern Plains Tribes, they were light, easy to maintain and economical to shoot. The bore size varied, it was most commonly between .55 and .62 caliber or 28 to 20 gage. Barrel lengths varied from 30 to 42 inches. The smaller bore size made the musket more economical than larger bore guns as it required less lead and powder for the shots. The flintlock mechanism was of the large musket type, which increased the likelihood of getting good sparks to fire the gun. They also sported an oversized trigger guard to allow for the wearing of mittens when winter

hunting, a very important feature during frigid northern winters.

THE TRADE

The Northern Plains Indians preferred and demanded English made Northwest Trade Muskets, as they were considered the best. The English made guns were distinguished from inferior models by the company name "Barnett," the "Tombstone Fox" trademark stamped on the lock plate and a brass serpent plate opposite the lock. However the American Fur Co. imported these guns from both England and Belgium. The guns were made with fake English trademarks. As the English trademarks denoted quality to the discerning North Plains Indians. A



Assiniboin Man
Karl Bodmer 1833



Northwest Trade Musket

Musket (Muzzel loader): A smoothbore, shoulder gun, made its way to the North American frontier and has a deeply rooted place in the history of weaponry in America. Loading and reloading the musket was slow, but the musket packed large caliber ammunition that could cause extensive damage to a target. Accuracy was minimally accurate to about 75 yards.

Rifle: Shoulder fired, with a barrel that has a helical groove or pattern of grooves ("rifling") cut into the barrel walls. When the projectile leaves the barrel, the spin averages out curve from imperfections improving accuracy and prevents tumbling which improves range.

Caliber: The inside diameter of the barrel in hundredths of an inch.

Gage: Another way to determine a guns bore size based on how many lead balls that just fits in the bore of the gun that weighs a pound.

cloth cover and a bullet mold and 20 rounds of ammunition were included. These guns were very profitable for The American Fur Company, a typical gun might cost around \$12, including shipping and insurance, but would trade for 6 to 10 buffalo robes. The robes values range from as \$18 to \$30.

LANCASTER RIFLE

The second most popular gun traded by Fort Union was the Lancaster rifle. Over the years, it was made by a number of gun makers, mostly in the Lancaster area of Pennsylvania. It was a full stock rifle with barrels from 42” to 44” long. The bore was 40 to 32 gage, .49 to .53 caliber. Most were flintlock, but beginning in 1840, percussion ignition guns were also sent upriver for trade. Their weight was about 10 lbs and cost the about Company \$11. The gun came with a cloth cover, bullet mold and a 2 or 3 piece wiping rod.



Lancaster Rifle

ENGLISH RIFLE

English rifles were also a trade item at Fort Union. Its specifications were generally the same as the Lancaster, but the stock was thicker and straighter, the gun felt clumsier than the Lancaster to many people. Even with an improved model by 1834, it was always a distant third in sales. It was made by John Joseph Henry of Boulton, PA. Its specifications and cost were similar to the Lancaster rifle.

SMOOTHBORE VS. RIFLE

The advantage of a rifle over a smoothbore was in accuracy and range. A rifled grooved barrel accuracy several times surpassed the range of a smoothbore. The North American Indians preferred the smoothbore for it's versatility. It could be used with a single ball for large game or shot for small game.

FLINTLOCK VS. PERCUSSION

The percussion ignition type was very common in the east by the 1830s but it was slow in being adopted by many in the western regions. For the area Plains Tribes the simplicity of a percussion cap was negated by their high cost use. A flintlock needed only flint, readily available in any stream, and gunpowder, easily traded for in large quantities. Whereas a percussion cap smoothbore or rifle could only fire with manufactured percussion caps, available only at fur trading posts. Essentially if percussion caps are lost or ruined, the gun reverts to a club until a fort is found. Thus the records show that flintlocks maintained their popularity at Fort Union well into the 1850’s. Head Clerk Rudolf Kurz’s diary notes that fort hunter, Charles Morgan, preferred flintlocks in his buffalo hunts but he also had a half stock percussion rifle.

PISTOLS

Pistols were never a popular trade item at Fort Union. The inventories usually list several pairs of old pistols, either steel or brass barreled. These were usually of the large size that would be carried in a man’s belt. Pistols were not popular with Northern Plains Indians, but many Anglo-Americans carried them. The archaeological digs at Fort Union, unearthed many parts of small pistols. These were the pocket size, as the name implies they could be carried in the pocket of the individual. Those found were single shot, percussion guns. John James Audubon noted that the “Booshway”(manager), Alexander Culbertson had a pepperbox pistol. The pepperbox had five or six barrels mounted around a central pin, each barrel was loaded and fired separately.



Pepperbox pistol

Company records denote special orders for the higher paid employees. There were orders for guns from the Hawken Brothers of St Louis, Mo. These rifles cost about \$24 each. There were also orders from Henry Derringer of Philadelphia for pairs of pistols at \$30 a pair. There were also a number of old U. S. Army muskets kept on hand at Fort Union to defend the fort. Fortunately they were rarely fired in anger.

Firearms were a part of daily life at Fort Union. They were traded and sold as part of the business and kept the employees fed and safe. The variety of weapons that were here over the 39 years of Fort Union’s existence is quite amazing.